Proof of Residence: Painting as a Method for Thinking Belonging

by

Maria Khan

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in

Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

Ignite Gallery, 100McCaul, 25-30th March Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2026

Abstract

This thesis examines belonging as an unresolved and affective condition shaped by migration, race, and everyday spatial experience. Drawing from my position as a diasporic artist from Pakistan living in Canada, the research explores how belonging is performed, negotiated, and deferred within contemporary Canadian contexts.

Grounded in the concept of racial melancholia, as theorized by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, alongside affect theory and postcolonial frameworks, the thesis investigates the gap between presence and attachment through three interconnected principles: location, sensory experience, and embodiment.

Central to the research is a body of oil paintings that position racialized figures within recognizable Canadian environments, including Tim Hortons interiors, shopping centres, transit systems, and public landmarks. These spaces function as sites where belonging is performed through everyday gestures yet remains affectively unresolved. Through layering, repetition, and incompleteness, the paintings resist visual closure, mirroring the emotional structure of melancholia.

The thesis further situates this practice in dialogue with artists Salman Toor, Mona Hatoum, and Jin-me Yoon, whose works similarly engage themes of diaspora and identity. By focusing on everyday public spaces and subtle affective dissonance, this research positions painting as a method for exploring unresolved experiences of belonging.

Key Words: Belonging, Racial melancholia, Painting as method, Diasporic experience, Everyday Canadian spaces, Affect, Incompleteness, Spatial negotiation

List of Figures

Introduction

"You broke the ocean in half to be here.

Only to meet nothing that wants you."[1]

The idea for this work began to take shape during a visit back to Pakistan, where I encountered a newly opened Tim Hortons with a line stretching outside—people waiting to experience what had already been imagined as "Canadian culture." I recognized that anticipation. Before I migrated to Canada eight years ago, Tim Hortons had been described to me with a similar reverence, as though it were a small but essential rite of passage into belonging. When I arrived at Pearson Airport, the first thing I did was buy my first "Canadian coffee." It tasted nothing like the dream I had imagined.

When I arrived in Canada, I began performing belonging through these same symbols. I wore Roots hoodies, visited Niagara Falls, walked through the Eaton Centre, and drank Tim Hortons coffee as though these gestures might confirm my place within a national identity. These were the rituals through which belonging had been narrated to me. Yet rather than producing attachment, they generated a quiet sense of dissonance. The more I tried to belong, the more distant belonging felt. Arrival, I realized, does not necessarily lead to arrival.

This experience reflects what David L. Eng and Shinhee Han describe as racial melancholia: a condition in which the promise of belonging is extended, yet never fully

[1] Nayyirah Waheed, *salt.* (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

realized.[2] The loss here is not of a place left behind, but of a sense of belonging that remains perpetually out of reach.

Diaspora is often framed as an expansion of identity, but it can also be experienced as a form of erosion—a gradual unravelling shaped by the pressure to approximate what one is not. Objects such as a Tim Hortons cup come to hold this tension. They promise proximity, recognition, and belonging, yet fail to produce attachment.

This research emerges from these lived conditions. It is grounded in my painting practice as a diasporic artist from Pakistan living in Canada, and examines how belonging is encountered within everyday spaces—coffee shops, shopping centres, transit systems, and public landmarks.

Rather than beginning with theory, this project begins with experience: the repeated attempt to belong, and the quiet realization that something does not settle.

Chapter One

Racial Melancholia, Belonging, and Painting as Research

1.1 Melancholia as a Framework for Diasporic Experience

Melancholia has long been understood as a condition of unresolved loss. In psychoanalytic theory, it describes a state in which mourning cannot be completed

because the object of loss remains ambiguous, internalized, or socially unacknowledged.[2] While early formulations positioned melancholia primarily as an individual pathology, contemporary theorists have expanded the term to account for collective and structural conditions. Scholars such as Eng and Han argue that melancholia also operates at the level of race, migration, and national belonging, where ideals of assimilation are internalized but remain structurally unattainable.[3]

For diasporic and racialized subjects, loss is rarely singular or clearly defined. It includes not only the loss of homeland, but also the loss of imagined futures, promised belonging, and coherent identity. These losses are often disallowed or rendered invisible within nationalist narratives of successful assimilation. As a result, melancholia persists not as an event to be resolved, but as an ongoing affective condition.

This research draws primarily on the concept of racial melancholia articulated by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han. They argue that racialized subjects are asked to internalize ideals of national belonging that remain structurally inaccessible.[4] In this formulation, melancholia emerges not from a failure to assimilate, but from being invited into a national imaginary that cannot fully accommodate racial difference. The subject is encouraged to desire belonging while simultaneously encountering its impossibility.

---

[2] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243-58.

[3] David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[4] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

Within this framework, melancholia is not simply pathological; it is diagnostic. It reveals how affect registers political exclusion at the level of the body.

1.2 Racial Melancholia and the Promise of Belonging

Eng and Han distinguish racial melancholia from classical melancholia by emphasizing its relation to national identity and citizenship. For immigrants and diasporic subjects, assimilation is often framed as both achievable and obligatory. National symbols, cultural rituals, and consumer spaces circulate as evidence that belonging is available to those who perform it correctly. However, as Eng and Han argue, the repeated failure of these performances to produce emotional or social integration generates a sustained state of mourning without closure.[5]

Racial melancholia, in this sense, is not the refusal to let go of the past, but the inability to arrive fully in the present. The subject remains suspended between what was left behind and what cannot be fully claimed. This suspension is not neutral; it is shaped by race, class, and visibility. As Sara Ahmed and Eng and Han demonstrate, certain bodies are more readily absorbed into national narratives, while others remain marked as provisional, conditional, or perpetually foreign.[6]

This condition resonates strongly within contemporary Canadian multiculturalism, where diversity is frequently celebrated at the level of representation

---

[5] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

[6] Sara Ahmed, On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

while structural inequities remain largely intact. Scholars such as Himani Bannerji and Sara Ahmed have argued that multiculturalism often emphasizes cultural recognition and visibility over material transformation, leaving systemic inequalities related to race, class, and migration unaddressed.[7] As a result, inclusion operates affectively—through objects, spaces, and rituals that signal national belonging—rather than through substantive changes to power structures. These affective invitations encourage participation and identification while obscuring the uneven distribution of access and recognition. Consequently, belonging is often performed outwardly but remains emotionally and materially uninhabitable for racialized subjects.[8]

In my practice, melancholia manifests not as overt despair but as quiet dissonance: the gap between participation and identification, between being present and feeling recognized. This affective gap becomes the conceptual ground of my paintings.

1.3 Melancholia, Place, and the Unfinished Arrival

Melancholia is inseparable from place. Migration reorganizes spatial relationships, but it does not guarantee spatial belonging. Drawing on postcolonial theories of hybridity and in-betweenness, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the

---

[7] Himani Bannerji, The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000); Ahmed, On Being Included.

[8] Sara Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

"unhomely," diasporic space can be understood as neither here nor there, but as a condition of ongoing negotiation.[9]

Belonging, in this context, becomes something one occupies temporarily rather than inhabits fully. Arrival sites—tourist landmarks, public squares, cafés, and suburban neighbourhoods—function as symbolic thresholds rather than destinations. Marc Augé describes such locations as "non-places," spaces of transit that resist identity formation and attachment.[10] For radicalized bodies, these environments often amplify exposure and insufficiency rather than comfort, intensifying the affective experience of not-belonging.[11]

The melancholic subject does not simply miss home; they experience the present as incomplete. This incompleteness is not resolved through time or familiarity but accumulates, shaping how the body moves through space, how it is seen, and how it sees itself. As Eng and Han argue, racial melancholia persists as an unresolved attachment to forms of belonging that remain structurally unattainable.[12]

This condition of incompleteness is not only conceptual but material and visual within my painting practice. It is articulated through the construction of space, the positioning of the figure, and the refusal of resolution within the image. The figures in my work are often situated within recognizable Canadian environments—such as Tim

---

[9] Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994).

[10] Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).

[11] Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness.

[12] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

Hortons interiors, suburban neighbourhoods, or public gathering spaces—yet their relationship to these sites remains unsettled. They are present but not fully integrated; positioned centrally but affectively distant.

In several works, this condition emerges through the depiction of interior spaces associated with familiarity and comfort. In one painting *(see Fig. 1)*, a solitary figure sits inside a Tim Hortons booth, surrounded by warm lighting and red seating, with a box of timbits and a donut placed prominently on the table. At first glance, the scene suggests comfort and routine, yet the image unsettles upon closer attention. The timbit box appears flattened and slightly misaligned, almost like a pasted sticker rather than a fully inhabited object, disrupting the illusion of presence. Beside it, the donut is rendered with a strange translucency, as if it exists but remains materially out of reach—visible, but not fully graspable.

Figure 1. *Roll Up the Rim: Not a Winner*, 2025. Oil on panel, 36×36 363636thor.Artwork by the author.

The figure's expression is direct and emotionally exposed, marked by exhaustion and quiet distress. His gaze does not anchor itself in the space;

instead, it seems to pass through it. This emotional clarity contrasts with the instability of the surrounding objects, reinforcing a disjunction between presence and belonging. Behind him, a window reveals snow-covered houses glowing with interior light—symbols of warmth and domestic comfort. Yet, they remain distant and inaccessible, separated by glass and cold. The exterior winter landscape intensifies this divide: the cold is not only environmental but affective.

Figure 2. *Insufficient Evidence of Belonging*, 2025. Oil on panel, 24 × 30 in.

Within this composition, racial melancholia is not expressed through absence, but through a persistent misalignment between body, space, and object. The markers of belonging are all present—food, brand, architecture, routine—but they fail to cohere into a lived sense of attachment. Instead, they hover in a state of partial existence, echoing the figure's own condition: visible, present, yet never fully at home.

In another work (*see Fig. 2*), a figure stands within a snow-covered suburban landscape, holding a Tim Hortons cup while wearing a winter hat marked with "Roots." These markers operate as visible signs of national belonging, yet the figure's expression remains heavy and unresolved. The gesture of holding the cup suggests participation, but not possession; the object is present without producing familiarity. As David L. Eng and Shinhee Han argue, racial melancholia emerges when the promise of assimilation is offered yet structurally withheld, leaving the subject caught in an ongoing process of attachment without resolution.[1] [13]The figure, here, embodies this condition—visibly aligned with national symbols, yet affectively unable to inhabit them.

The suburban houses in the background appear almost doll-like—uniform, softened, and indistinct—stripped of specificity and personal history. Rather than offering a sense of home, they read as placeholders: generic structures that signal settlement without intimacy. Their repetition flattens the landscape into something staged, as if belonging here requires occupying a pre-existing form rather than inhabiting it. In this sense, the houses function as what Sara Ahmed might describe as "happy objects"—sites

[13] David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," Psychoanalytic Dialogues 10, no. 4 (2000): 671.

that promise comfort, stability, and belonging, yet remain oriented toward others, never fully extending that promise to the racialized subject.[14] The environment does not recognize the figure; it merely accommodates his presence.

The cold atmosphere intensifies this estrangement. Snow accumulates unevenly across the ground, leaving the roads slushed and unclean, while flakes continue to fall against a darkened sky. This is not a picturesque winter, but a lingering, heavy one—where movement feels slowed and suspended. The night setting further withdraws the scene into solitude, muting any sense of warmth or social life. Within this stillness, the figure's exhaustion becomes central: his downcast eyes and weighed expression register not only physical fatigue, but what Eng and Han describe as the psychic cost of unresolved loss—the continuous effort of maintaining attachments that cannot be fully secured[15].

The title, *Insufficient Evidence of Belonging*, frames the work through a bureaucratic logic, echoing the language of immigration assessment where presence must be proven and attachment measured. Despite the visible signs—the branded clothing, the familiar cup, the suburban setting—the image suggests that these gestures do not accumulate into recognition. Instead, they remain as surface indicators, unable to translate into a deeper sense of being held by the space. As Ahmed reminds us, orientation toward objects of belonging does not guarantee arrival; proximity does not

[14] Sara Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.

[15] Eng and Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," 669–670.

equal attachment.[164] Belonging, here, is not denied outright, but remains unverified—something continually performed, yet never fully confirmed.

Incompleteness is further articulated through painterly strategies that resist visual closure. Areas of the paintings are deliberately left unresolved: sections remain in drawing, visible as lines, outlines, or underpainting rather than fully rendered forms. These unfinished passages are not preliminary stages awaiting completion, but intentional elements of the composition. They function as a visual language that interrupts coherence, allowing the viewer to encounter the painting as an ongoing process rather than a resolved image. The surface is constructed through layers that do not fully conceal one another. Foreground and background often become translucent, bleeding into each other rather than remaining clearly separated. This collapsing of spatial hierarchy destabilizes the relationship between figure and environment, suggesting that the subject cannot fully anchor itself within the space it occupies. The environment does not hold the body securely; instead, both remain in a state of partial visibility and suspension.

Fig. 3. *Arrival Does Not Confirm Belonging* (detail), 2026. Oil on panel, 24 × 48 in

[16] Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 41.

Objects within the paintings similarly resist stable relationships. Forms overlap without resolving into clear spatial logic: a Tim Hortons cup appears within the hands *(see Fig.3)*, yet the hands do not fully grasp or contain it. This disjunction disrupts the expected function of touch and possession. The gesture of holding—often associated with familiarity, ownership, or belonging—is rendered incomplete. The object is present, but the connection remains uncertain.

Repetition across the body of work reinforces this condition. By returning to similar sites, objects, and gestures—coffee cups, branded clothing, suburban homes, and interior booths—the paintings do not move toward resolution but instead accumulate variations of the same unresolved encounter. Each work revisits the promise of belonging without fulfilling it.

In this sense, the paintings do not simply depict incompleteness; they are structured by it. The refusal to fully resolve form, space, and gesture mirrors the affective condition of racial melancholia itself—ongoing, layered, and resistant to closure. This raises a methodological question: if melancholia is experienced as an unresolved, affective condition shaped by space, repetition, and embodiment, how can it be meaningfully engaged within research? The challenge is not only to represent this condition, but to work through it in a way that can sustain its ambiguity without reducing it to explanation. It is at this point that painting becomes necessary—not as illustration, but as a mode of inquiry.

1.4 From Theory to Practice: Why Melancholia Demands Painting

While racial melancholia can be theorized through psychoanalysis, postcolonial thought, and affect theory, it cannot be fully contained within language. Scholars working within affect theory, such as Ann Cvetkovich and Jill Bennett, argue that emotional states linked to trauma, loss, and displacement exceed representational clarity and instead register through sensation, atmosphere, and embodied experience.[17] This excess—what cannot be fully articulated—demands forms of engagement beyond textual analysis.

Painting becomes necessary precisely because melancholia cannot be resolved into language. It operates not as illustration, but as a method of inquiry. Through slowness, repetition, and material process, painting mirrors the temporal structure of melancholia itself—non-linear, accumulative, and unresolved. Layers are built, obscured, and reworked; surfaces resist closure. Meaning does not arrive immediately but emerges through duration.

As an artist trained within painterly traditions, my relationship to the medium is inseparable from memory and formation. Painting becomes a space where unresolved affect can be sustained without the demand for clarity. It allows for a mode of thinking that is embodied rather than purely conceptual, aligning with Graeme Sullivan's

[17] Ann Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Jill Bennett, Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

understanding of art practice as a form of research that generates knowledge through making.[18]

Materiality plays a central role in this process. The use of layered surfaces, visible underdrawing, and partially resolved forms reflects an engagement with incompleteness as both method and subject. Rather than producing a finished image that resolves tension, the paintings hold contradiction—between visibility and opacity, presence and absence, attachment and distance. As Jill Bennett suggests, affect in visual art operates through encounter and sensation rather than symbolic explanation, allowing the viewer to experience rather than simply interpret.[19]

Within this framework, painting functions as an affective archive, recording not events but emotional residue. It documents how the body moves through space, how it encounters environments that promise belonging, and how it remains partially unanchored within them. The figures in my work are not representations of identity alone; they are sites through which melancholia is felt, sustained, and made visible.

In this way, painting operates as research: a method of thinking through the body, through space, and through the quiet endurance of not-arriving. Rather than resolving melancholia, it holds it in suspension—allowing its complexity to remain present, visible, and unresolved.

---

[18] Graeme Sullivan, Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010).

[19] Bennett, Empathic Vision.

1.5 Racial Melancholia and Belonging as Performance

Within frameworks of racial melancholia, belonging operates less as an achieved condition and more as a set of repeated performances. For racialized immigrants, national belonging is frequently framed as accessible through participation in everyday cultural rituals—consumption, dress, movement through space, and public display. These acts suggest that belonging can be attained through repetition and recognition, positioning identity as something that can be performed into being.

Fig. 4. *Holiday Spirit Not Included*, 2025. Oil on panel, 12 × 24 in.

As Eng and Han argue, racial melancholia emerges precisely within this structure: subjects are encouraged to internalize ideals of national belonging that remain structurally unattainable.[20] The failure of these performances to produce emotional or social integration does not dissolve the desire for belonging; instead, it intensifies attachment to it. Belonging becomes something that must be continually enacted, even when it cannot be fully inhabited.

This condition extends into other paintings where belonging is enacted through different spatial and

[20] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

symbolic registers. In a work set within the Eaton Centre *(see Fig.4)* during the Christmas season, a large decorated tree and surrounding crowds generate an atmosphere of warmth, spectacle, and collective festivity. The glowing lights, suspended ornaments, and interior illumination construct what Sara Ahmed might describe as an affective orientation toward happiness—an environment that promises inclusion through shared seasonal rituals. Positioned in the foreground, however, a single figure appears isolated, facing outward as if deliberately staging himself within the scene. The figure's knitted hat, patterned with a mountainous landscape and topped with a pom-pom, visually echoes the monumental Christmas tree rising behind him. This repetition creates a subtle mirroring between body and environment, as if the figure attempts to align himself with the symbolic language of the space. Yet this alignment remains surface-level. The hat becomes a portable landscape—an imagined elsewhere—that sits atop the body without fully integrating it into the present environment. The gesture suggests not only adaptation, but also displacement: a layering of one place over another that never fully resolves.

The act of posing is central here. The figure appears to hold himself still for an imagined photograph, as if capturing proof of presence within this festive, culturally legible moment. This image, one can imagine, is intended to be sent back home—a visual confirmation of arrival, participation, and proximity to a recognizable scene of Western celebration. In this sense, the painting stages what Eng and Han describe as racial melancholia: a condition in which the subject performs assimilation while remaining structurally excluded from full belonging. The photograph becomes evidence not of integration, but of effort.

Despite the surrounding warmth, the figure's expression resists the affective pull

Fig. 5. *Emotional Ties Not Applicable, 2026, oil on panel, 48 × 36 in.*

of the environment. His face remains heavy, fatigued, and inwardly withdrawn, refusing to synchronize with the celebratory atmosphere. The crowd behind him dissolves into indistinct silhouettes, emphasizing his isolation even within a space defined by collective presence. Belonging here is not absent, but deferred—constructed through gesture, image, and repetition, yet never fully inhabited. The scene holds together two temporalities at once: the immediate performance of being there, and the lingering distance of not quite arriving.

This condition of deferred belonging becomes more pronounced in *Emotional Ties Not Applicable*, where the figure appears doubled, occupying the same space while facing in opposite directions. Set against the illuminated Toronto skyline—marked by the CN Tower and Rogers Centre—the painting situates the body within unmistakable symbols of national identity and urban recognition. These landmarks function as visual anchors of place, yet their presence does not stabilize the figure's sense of location. Instead, the doubled body suggests a psychic split, echoing what Eng and Han describe as racial melancholia: a condition in which the subject remains attached to an unresolved loss, unable to fully detach from what is left behind while also unable to fully inhabit what is present.

The scarf draped across the figure's shoulders operates as a cultural marker, carrying traces of another geography and history. It introduces a second layer of belonging that coexists with, but does not merge into, the surrounding environment. This layering produces a tension between visibility and estrangement, where identity is neither singular nor settled. The winter atmosphere—cold, dimly lit, and punctuated by falling snow—further intensifies this sense of suspension. The city glows in the background, but its warmth remains inaccessible, held at a distance behind the figure's inward, fatigued expression.

In this sense, the painting resonates with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely," where the boundaries between home and world collapse, producing a condition of dislocation within the very space one occupies. The figure is both here and elsewhere, present yet divided. Belonging is not simply denied, but

fractured—experienced as a simultaneous attachment to multiple places that cannot be reconciled into a coherent whole.

This condition extends further in a *Arrival Does Not Confirm Belonging*, depicting two figures—a female and a male—seated separately in front of Toronto City Hall, each holding a Tim Hortons cup. While the figures are visually paired through composition, gesture, and setting, they remain affectively disconnected from one another. The repetition of posture and object suggests a shared condition rather than a shared experience. Belonging is performed in parallel, but not collectively inhabited.

Fig. 6. *Arrival Does Not Confirm Belonging*, 2026, oil on panel, 24 × 48 in.

The presence of City Hall introduces an institutional dimension to this performance. As a site associated with governance, citizenship, and national structure, it operates as a symbolic marker of official belonging. Yet the figures remain positioned outside of it, seated rather than entering, present but not participating. This spatial relationship reinforces a condition in which proximity to institutional belonging does not translate into access or attachment.

The bright, saturated clothing worn by both figures further intensifies this tension. While visually signaling presence and visibility, these elements contrast sharply with the figures' subdued expressions and withdrawn affect. This disjunction reflects how inclusion can be performed outwardly while remaining emotionally uninhabitable.[21] The repeated gesture of holding the coffee cup—an object already established as a marker of national belonging—continues to resist resolution. The object is shared across both figures, yet does not produce familiarity, comfort, or connection.

In this way, the diptych extends the logic of racial melancholia beyond the individual, suggesting a collective condition that is experienced across bodies, genders, and spaces. The figures do not interact, yet they mirror one another, reinforcing the persistence of belonging as a repeated, unresolved performance rather than a relational or shared state.

Within my paintings, this condition is not represented through overt conflict or critique, but through quiet persistence. Figures occupy spaces that appear familiar and

[21] Ahmed, On Being Included.

accessible, yet remain affectively distant from them. The performance of belonging is visible, but its failure is equally present. Belonging appears not as a completed state, but as an ongoing rehearsal—repeated, adjusted, and never fully resolved.

1.6 Three Principles of Belonging: Location, Sensory Experience, and Embodiment

Building on this understanding of belonging as a repeated and unresolved performance, my practice articulates belonging through three interrelated principles: location, sensory experience, and embodiment. These principles do not function as stable categories or solutions, but as conditions through which belonging is encountered, negotiated, and deferred. Together, they structure both the conceptual framework of this research and the visual logic of the paintings.

Rather than treating belonging as an abstract social ideal, this framework approaches it as something materially and affectively produced—through space, through the senses, and through the body. Each principle isolates a different dimension of how racial melancholia is lived, while remaining interconnected within the work.

1.6.1 Location as Belonging

Drawing on spatial theory, and particularly Henri Lefebvre's argument that space is socially produced rather than passively inhabited, location can be understood as a site through which belonging is structured and negotiated.[22] In my practice, this negotiation

[22] Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

becomes visible through the repeated positioning of figures within recognizable Canadian environments, such as Tim Hortons interiors, suburban neighborhoods, public squares, and institutional sites like Toronto City Hall.

These spaces are not neutral backdrops; they are socially and politically structured environments that shape how subjects are seen and how they experience themselves within them. For racialized immigrant subjects, occupying these spaces does not necessarily translate into belonging. Presence may be permitted, but attachment remains conditional.[23]

Within the paintings, figures are positioned centrally within these environments, emphasizing visibility rather than marginality. However, this visibility does not resolve into comfort or integration. In the diptych set in front of Toronto City Hall *(see Fig.6)*, the figures are placed directly in relation to an institutional landmark, yet remain seated outside of its functional space. This positioning reflects how proximity to national structures does not guarantee access to belonging. Similarly, in interior scenes such as Tim Hortons *(see Fig.1)*, the familiarity of the environment contrasts with the figure's affective distance.

Location, in this sense, does not offer arrival. Instead, it marks the conditions under which one is allowed to be present without being fully anchored.

[23] Ahmed, On Being Included; Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

1.6.2 Sensory Experience as Belonging

Belonging is also mediated through sensory experience. Environmental conditions such as cold, snow, artificial lighting, and atmospheric instability shape how the body encounters space. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on affect, emotions can be understood as orientations that direct bodies toward or away from objects and spaces.[24] In this sense, sensory experience becomes a way of registering where one does not fully belong.

In my paintings, snow and winter conditions appear repeatedly, not simply as environmental details but as affective conditions. In suburban scenes *(see Fig.2)*, the uniformity of houses and the stillness of the environment produce repetition without familiarity. In exterior works, the sky appears unstable and heavy, suggesting an atmosphere that resists comfort and clarity. These elements do not simply describe place; they articulate how place is experienced.

Even interior environments are shaped by sensory disjunction. In the Tim Hortons interior painting, the warmth of the booth contrasts with the emotional withdrawal of the figure. This tension between environmental comfort and affective distance reinforces the idea that belonging cannot be secured through sensory familiarity alone.

This sensory condition extends into paintings that reference the Canadian landscape more directly, including mountainous terrains, forests, and night skies. These environments evoke familiar visual codes of national identity—vastness, nature, and the

[24] Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness.

sublime—yet the figures within them remain affectively detached. The landscape does not function as a site of immersion or belonging, but as a distant backdrop.

In one painting *(see Fig.7)*, a figure is positioned against a mountainous night scene, illuminated by a bright moon. While the environment suggests stillness and clarity, the figure's gaze is directed elsewhere, unfocused and withdrawn. The presence of the landscape does not anchor the body; instead, it intensifies a sense of separation. The figure does not inhabit the environment, but exists alongside it.

Figure 7. *Viewing Area Only*, 2025. Oil on panel, 6 × 6 in.

This disjunction challenges the assumption that proximity to landscape produces belonging. Instead, the sensory qualities of the environment—darkness, distance, and atmospheric stillness—reinforce a condition of internal withdrawal. The landscape becomes less a place of connection and more a space that reflects the subject's inability to settle within it.

Sensory experience, therefore, becomes a measure of belonging—not through comfort, but through the persistent awareness of not fully settling.

1.6.3 Embodiment as Belonging

Figure 8. *Proof of Payment*, 2025, Oil on panel, 18x24 in.

The body is the most immediate site through which belonging is performed and contested. Within frameworks of racial melancholia, the body carries the tension between internalized ideals of belonging and their structural impossibility.[25] This tension is expressed through posture, gesture, clothing, and visibility.

In my paintings, the brown figure is consistently positioned as central, visible, and present. This choice resists both erasure and marginalization. However, visibility does not resolve into recognition. The figures often appear withdrawn, their expressions subdued, and their gestures incomplete. They occupy space, but do not fully inhabit it.

Clothing becomes a key site of embodied performance. Items such as winter jackets, branded hats, and culturally recognizable attire function as attempts to align the body with national identity. In the suburban painting *(see Fig.2)*, the figure's "Roots" hat

[25] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

and Tim Hortons cup operate as visible markers of belonging. Yet these gestures remain unstable; they signal participation without producing attachment.[26]

The body's relationship to objects further complicates this condition. Across multiple works, the act of holding does not resolve into possession. The Tim Hortons cup appears in the hand, but the grip remains uncertain. This disjunction reflects belonging as something performed but not secured.

This condition of embodied belonging extends further in a painting depicting two figures seated within a Toronto subway *(see Fig.8)*, suggestive of a father and child. Unlike earlier works in which figures appear isolated, the bodies here are positioned in close proximity, sharing the same space and direction of movement. Yet this proximity does not resolve into connection. The figures remain affectively withdrawn, their gazes unfocused, and their expressions subdued. The presence of relational closeness does not produce emotional alignment, reinforcing the persistence of melancholia across bodies rather than within a single subject.

The subway functions as a transitional space—neither destination nor origin, but a site of movement. Such spaces align with Marc Augé's concept of "non-places," environments defined by circulation rather than attachment.[27] Within this context, the figures are not arriving, but continuously moving, suspended within a condition of

---

[26] Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness; Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

[27] Augé, Non-Places.

in-betweenness. The ambiguity of their destination reinforces this sense of deferred arrival.

Figure 9. *Nothing Here Knows My Name*, 2025. Oil on panel, 24 × 36

The child's clothing introduces another dimension of embodied performance. Wearing a Blue Jays cap and a North Face jacket, the body is visibly aligned with recognizable markers of Canadian identity. These elements suggest how belonging is learned and performed from an early stage, embedded within everyday gestures of dress and presentation. Yet, as in other works, this performance does not produce comfort or ease. The child's expression remains distant, echoing the same affective condition as the adult figure.

The shared space of the subway, with its artificial warmth and repetitive structure, further intensifies this tension. The figures occupy a public environment designed for collective movement, yet remain emotionally separate. In this way, the painting extends the logic of racial melancholia into a relational and generational context, suggesting that

belonging is not only individually experienced, but also collectively carried—transmitted across bodies without being resolved.

A similar condition of withdrawal is evident in *Nothing Here Knows My Name* (Fig. 9) where the figure is positioned in isolation against a landscape or undefined background. In these works, the gaze becomes a critical site of embodiment. The figures do not return the viewer's look, nor do they engage with their surroundings. Instead, their eyes appear directed toward an indeterminate space—neither object nor horizon, but something unresolved.

This inward orientation suggests that melancholia is not only spatial or social, but deeply internalized. The body remains present, but the gaze withdraws. The figure is wearing a Canadian winter hat and heavy outerwear appears prepared for the environment, yet remains psychologically distant from it. The clothing signals adaptation, while the gaze signals disconnection.

This tension between external alignment and internal withdrawal reinforces the idea that belonging cannot be secured through appearance or proximity alone. The body performs belonging, but the subject does not fully inhabit that performance. The gaze, in this sense, becomes a marker of unresolved attachment—directed not toward the present environment, but toward something absent, imagined, or unreachable.

In this way, embodiment does not resolve belonging; it reveals its contradictions. The body becomes the site where belonging is rehearsed, internalized, and continuously deferred.

1.6.4 Belonging as an Unresolved Condition

Together, these three principles—location, sensory experience, and embodiment—articulate belonging as an ongoing and unresolved condition rather than a fixed state. Location offers visibility without anchoring. Sensory experience produces awareness without comfort. Embodiment performs belonging without securing recognition.

These principles operate simultaneously within the paintings, producing a layered understanding of diasporic experience. They allow the work to move beyond representation and into analysis, structuring how melancholia is encountered, sustained, and made visible.

Within this framework, painting functions as the space where these conditions can remain unresolved. Rather than offering solutions or resolutions, the work holds tension—allowing belonging to appear as something continuously negotiated, repeatedly performed, and never fully achieved.

1.7 Class, Access, and Everyday National Spaces

Belonging is not only shaped by affect, space, and embodiment, but also by class and access. While the previous sections have examined how belonging is experienced and performed, it is equally important to consider the material conditions that structure where one can go, what one can access, and how one is positioned within national life. Belonging, in this sense, is not distributed evenly; it is mediated through economic, social, and institutional frameworks that determine the terms of participation.

Critical scholars of Canadian multiculturalism have argued that diversity is often celebrated at the level of representation while structural inequalities persist along racial and economic lines. Himani Bannerji critiques multiculturalism as a framework that emphasizes cultural difference while leaving underlying systems of power intact.[28] Similarly, Sara Ahmed demonstrates how institutional inclusion frequently operates through symbolic gestures of diversity rather than material transformation.[29] Within this context, belonging becomes something that is recognized visually and culturally, but not necessarily supported structurally.

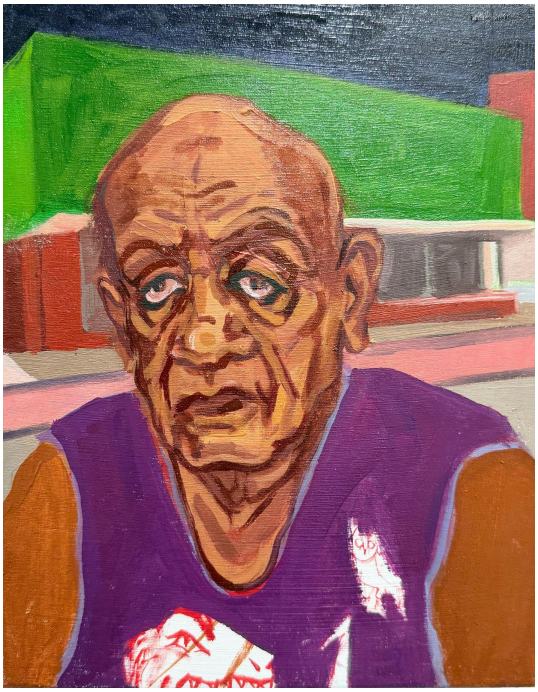

Figure 10. *$1+ (Access Not Included)*, 2026. Oil on panel, 8 × 10 in

These contradictions become visible within the everyday geographies of immigrant life. Spaces such as bargain centres, thrift stores, and discount supermarkets are accessible and familiar, yet they also mark economic limitation and social positioning. Locations such as Dollarama or No Frills operate as sites of necessity rather than choice, shaping how subjects encounter national life through conditions of affordability and restriction. These spaces are not marginal; they are central to the lived experience of

[28] Bannerji, The Dark Side of the Nation.

[29] Ahmed, On Being Included.

many immigrants, yet they remain largely absent from dominant representations of national identity.

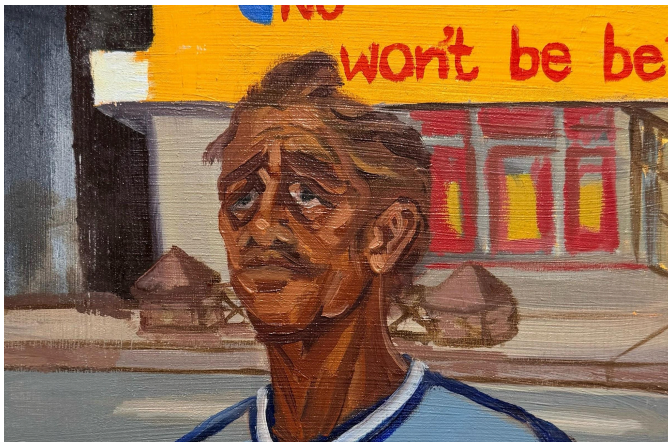

Figure 11. *No Name*, 2025. Oil on panel, 6 × 8 in.

At the same time, spaces associated with prestige and aspirational consumption—such as high-end retail environments or exclusive cultural institutions—remain unevenly accessible. The division between who occupies which spaces, and under what conditions, reveals how class mediates belonging. Access to national life is stratified, producing different experiences of visibility, mobility, and participation.

This uneven distribution of access is further reinforced through institutional structures that regulate labor, citizenship, and economic participation. As Nandita Sharma argues, migrant subjects are often positioned within national economies through conditions of precarity, where recognition is tied to productivity, compliance, and economic contribution.[30] Public institutions such as employment offices, service centres, and bureaucratic spaces function as sites where belonging is assessed and managed rather than secured. These environments render the subject legible primarily through lack—lack of work, status, or stability—reinforcing the conditional nature of belonging.

---

[30] Nandita Sharma, Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of "Migrant Workers" in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

In my painting practice, these classed and institutional dynamics are not represented through overt critique, but through the depiction of ordinary, everyday environments. The recurring presence of sites such as Tim Hortons, suburban neighborhoods, and public gathering spaces reflects the spaces that are accessible, familiar, and socially sanctioned. However, the figures within these environments remain affectively distant, reinforcing the gap between participation and belonging.

Objects and spaces associated with affordability—coffee cups, fast food, everyday clothing—appear repeatedly, not as neutral details but as markers of classed experience. These elements situate the figures within specific economic conditions, grounding the work in the material realities of immigrant life. At the same time, the absence of aspirational or elite spaces points to the limits of access that shape these experiences.

National celebrations further expose these contradictions. Events such as Canada Day function as public performances of unity and collective identity, inviting participation through shared symbols—flags, clothing, and communal gathering. However, as Ahmed suggests, such performances rely on affective alignment rather than structural inclusion.[31] For racialized subjects, participation in these rituals does not necessarily resolve feelings of alienation; instead, it can intensify awareness of the gap between appearance and experience.

Within my work, this condition is reflected through figures who occupy these spaces without ease or resolution. They are present within the national landscape, yet

[31] Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness.

their relationship to it remains provisional. The environments appear familiar, even welcoming, but the figures do not fully settle into them. This tension reflects how class and access shape not only where one can be, but how one feels while being there.

By foregrounding everyday national spaces, my practice resists idealized narratives of migration and multicultural success. Instead, it attends to the material conditions through which belonging is negotiated—conditions shaped by affordability, accessibility, and institutional regulation. In this context, racial melancholia is not only an affective condition but a material one, sustained through repetition, limitation, and the uneven distribution of access.

1.8 Painting as Research: Materiality, Slowness, and Interdisciplinary Practice

This chapter has established racial melancholia as the conceptual ground through which my painting practice operates, framing belonging as an affective, spatial, and embodied condition shaped by class and access. Within this framework, painting is not positioned as an illustrative medium but as a research methodology—one capable of holding ambiguity, contradiction, and unresolved experience.

Practice-based research scholars argue that artistic processes generate forms of knowledge that are not fully translatable into language, particularly when engaging affect, memory, and embodiment.[32] Painting, in this context, becomes a mode of thinking rather than representation. Its slowness, repetition, and material resistance mirror the temporal

[32] Sullivan, Art Practice as Research.

structure of melancholia itself—non-linear, accumulative, and ongoing. The act of painting allows meaning to emerge through duration rather than declaration.

Materiality plays a critical role in this process. Layered surfaces, bright palettes, and the deliberate refusal of visual resolution register the emotional residue of displacement rather than narrating it directly. As Bennett suggests, affect in visual art operates through sensation and encounter rather than symbolic explanation, producing knowledge through embodied response.[33] Painting thus becomes a site where racial melancholia can be sustained without demanding closure.

This research is situated within an interdisciplinary framework that brings together painting, critical theory, and spatial analysis to examine diasporic belonging as an affective and material condition. While the project is grounded in painting as a primary medium, it extends beyond traditional studio practice by engaging concepts from psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, affect theory, and cultural geography. These disciplines provide the conceptual tools through which belonging is understood not as a fixed identity, but as a condition shaped by power, space, and embodied experience.[34]

Within this context, painting operates not as illustration, but as a method of inquiry—one that works alongside writing rather than subordinate to it. The visual and the textual function together as parallel forms of research, each addressing aspects of experience that the other cannot fully contain. While theory offers language to articulate

---

[33] Bennett, Empathic Vision.

[34] Bhabha, The Location of Culture; Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness; Lefebvre, The Production of Space.

structures of racial melancholia and the politics of belonging, painting engages what exceeds language: affect, atmosphere, and the durational experience of inhabiting space.[35]

The project is also interdisciplinary in its engagement with everyday sites—bargain centres, transit zones, public squares, and nationalist celebrations—as spaces of analysis. Drawing from spatial theory and cultural studies, these locations are treated not merely as backgrounds, but as active participants in the production of belonging. They are read as social and ideological spaces where identity is performed, negotiated, and often destabilized.

By integrating painting, theoretical writing, and spatial investigation, this research aligns with the interdisciplinary ethos of the IAMD program, where knowledge is produced through the intersection of practice and critical reflection.[36] The project does not privilege one discipline over another; instead, it operates across them, allowing different forms of knowledge—visual, embodied, and theoretical—to inform and complicate one another.

In this way, the work proposes interdisciplinarity not simply as a combination of fields, but as a necessary approach for understanding diasporic belonging. The complexity of migration, affect, and identity cannot be contained within a single discipline. It must be approached through multiple forms of inquiry that together can hold contradiction, ambiguity, and lived experience.

---

[35] Bennett, Empathic Vision; Sullivan, Art Practice as Research.

[36] OCAD University, "Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design," accessed March 22, 2026.

Chapter Two

Melancholia, Diaspora, and Contemporary Artistic Lineages

2.1 Melancholia and Diaspora in Contemporary Art

Contemporary art has increasingly engaged melancholia as a critical lens through which to examine displacement, migration, and the emotional afterlives of colonial and national histories.[37] Rather than representing loss as a past event, many artists approach melancholia as a persistent condition—one that shapes subjectivity, embodiment, and spatial experience in the present.

Scholars of affect and visual culture have emphasized that melancholia in contemporary art does not necessarily manifest through overt narratives of trauma, but through atmospheres of suspension, repetition, and emotional restraint.[38] These works resist closure, instead holding viewers in a space of unresolved feeling. In this sense, melancholia operates not only as a thematic concern but also as a structuring condition that shapes how images unfold and how time is experienced.

This chapter places my painting practice in dialogue with artists whose work similarly engages melancholia as a condition shaped by race, migration, and national belonging. Rather than positioning these artists as direct influences, I approach their

[37] Bennett, Empathic Vision; Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings.

[38] Bennett, Empathic Vision; Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings.

practices as points of resonance and divergence—sites where shared concerns emerge through distinct visual strategies, mediums, and cultural contexts.

This chapter focuses on the work of Salman Toor, Mona Hatoum, and Jin-me Yoon. Each artist addresses melancholia through different registers: Toor through figurative painting and intimacy, Hatoum through spatial tension and embodiment, and Yoon through performance and landscape. Together, their practices form a transnational conversation around how diasporic subjects navigate visibility, displacement, and the limits of belonging.

By situating my work alongside these artists, this chapter clarifies how my practice contributes to contemporary discussions of diasporic melancholia through painting. While their works emphasize interiority, institutional critique, or performative intervention, my paintings focus on everyday public spaces associated with national promise—tourist landmarks, consumer environments, and sites of collective participation.[39]

Figure 12. *Late Night Gathering*, © Salman Toor. Courtesy of Nature Morte Gallery

2.2 Salman Toor: Intimacy, the Brown Body, and Melancholia

The work of Salman Toor offers a significant point of

[39] "Queer Boy and Brown Immigrant: I Kn
2020,
https://onartandaesthetics.com/2020/01/10/queer-boy-and-brown-immigrant-i-know-a-place-by-salman-toor/

resonance for understanding melancholia as it manifests through the racialized, diasporic body in contemporary painting.[40] Toor's figurative practice centres brown figures navigating private interiors, social gatherings, and moments of intimacy within Western urban contexts. These scenes are often suffused with tenderness and vulnerability, yet they remain marked by a quiet sense of estrangement.

Critics have noted that Toor's paintings articulate a form of diasporic melancholia grounded in displacement, desire, and historical consciousness rather than overt trauma.[41] His figures occupy spaces that appear warm and communal, yet the emotional register of the work remains suspended. The interiors function not as stable homes but as provisional shelters—sites where belonging is momentarily rehearsed but never fully secured.

Toor's engagement with melancholia is inseparable from his focus on the brown body. Positioned centrally within the frame, these figures resist marginalization while simultaneously carrying the weight of visibility. Their postures often suggest inwardness or emotional containment, reflecting what Eng and Han describe as the internalization of unresolved loss within racialized subjectivity.[42] Melancholia, here, is not expressed through despair but through restraint.

---

[40] Whitney Museum of American Art, "Salman Toor: How Will I Know," exhibition page, New York, 2020.

[41] Tausif Noor, "Salman Toor's Cosmopolitan Queer Life," Frieze, February 16, 2021; Whitney Museum of American Art, "Salman Toor: How Will I Know."

[42] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

While Toor's work frequently unfolds within interior spaces, my own practice situates melancholia within public and semi-public environments associated with national promise—tourist landmarks, transit zones, and everyday consumer spaces. This distinction is critical. Where Toor explores intimacy as a fragile refuge from external hostility, my paintings examine exposure as a persistent condition. The figures in my work are not sheltered by interiority; they are positioned within spaces designed for visibility, circulation, and performance.

This difference points to divergent spatial strategies in addressing diasporic melancholia. Toor's interiors allow for moments of softness and relationality, even as they remain historically and politically charged. In contrast, my work emphasizes the affective tension of public space, where belonging is enacted under the gaze of the nation. Melancholia, in this context, is intensified by exposure rather than mitigated by intimacy.

Despite these differences, both practices foreground the brown figure as a site of complexity rather than stereotype. In both cases, the body becomes a vessel for unresolved affect, carrying histories of migration, racialization, and expectation. However, while Toor's figures often engage one another within enclosed environments, my figures frequently stand alone, isolated within expansive or impersonal settings. This isolation underscores the theme of unaccompanied belonging—being present without relational anchoring.

Importantly, Toor's work has been situated within broader discussions of queer diasporic identity and postcolonial temporality, where melancholia functions as a means

of negotiating both loss and desire.[43] While my practice does not foreground sexuality in the same way, it similarly engages melancholia as a condition shaped by longing, deferral, and affective labour. The resonance lies not in shared subject matter, but in a shared commitment to painting as a medium capable of holding emotional complexity without resolution.

By placing my work in dialogue with Toor's, this comparison clarifies how diasporic melancholia can be articulated through distinct spatial and affective registers. Toor's interiors offer moments of fragile refuge, while my public spaces insist on exposure and endurance. Together, these approaches reveal the multiplicity of ways in which the racialized body navigates belonging—not as arrival, but as an ongoing, emotionally charged negotiation.

2.3 Mona Hatoum: Displacement, the Body, and Hostile Space

The work of Mona Hatoum offers a critical counterpoint for understanding how melancholia operates through spatial tension and the vulnerability of the body.[44] Working primarily in installation, sculpture, and video, Hatoum transforms familiar domestic and institutional forms into sites of discomfort, surveillance, and threat. Her practice does not depict displacement as narrative; rather, it produces conditions in which the viewer feels instability, exposure, and unease.

---

[43] José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Whitney Museum of American Art, "Salman Toor: How Will I Know."

[44] Michael Archer, Mona Hatoum (London: Phaidon, 1997).

Critics have frequently interpreted Hatoum's work through the lens of exile and dislocation, noting how her practice destabilizes the boundaries between home and hostility.[45] Everyday objects—beds, kitchen utensils, cages, maps—are altered so that they no longer offer comfort or function. Instead, they become charged with tension, suggesting that spaces typically associated with safety can also operate as mechanisms of control. This inversion aligns with postcolonial understandings of the "unhomely," where the domestic is permeated by the political and the familiar becomes estranged.[46]

Hatoum's engagement with melancholia is not representational but experiential. The viewer is positioned within environments that evoke anxiety, restriction, or hyper-visibility, producing an embodied awareness of vulnerability. As Bennett argues, such affective encounters in contemporary art generate knowledge through sensation rather than narrative explanation.[47] Hatoum's work exemplifies this approach: it does not tell the viewer about displacement but situates them within its affective conditions.

While Hatoum's installations often operate through immersive environments and sculptural intervention, my painting practice engages similar concerns through the depiction of everyday public spaces. Where Hatoum transforms the domestic into a site of hostility, my work examines how public and national spaces—tourist sites, transit zones, consumer environments—produce quieter forms of exclusion. These are not overtly

---

[45] Archer, Mona Hatoum.

[46] Bhabha, The Location of Culture.

[47] Bennett, Empathic Vision.

threatening spaces; rather, their familiarity masks the conditions under which belonging remains partial and conditional.

This distinction marks a shift in the register of melancholia. In Hatoum's work,

Figure 13. *Homebound*, 2000, by Mona Hatoum. Photograph courtesy of Tate / reproduced from *The Guardian*.

the body is frequently subjected to spatial constraint, fragmentation, or implied violence. In my paintings, the body is less physically threatened yet remains affectively unsettled. The figures occupy space without fully inhabiting it, echoing a condition of ongoing negotiation rather than immediate danger. Melancholia, in this context, is sustained not through rupture but through repetition—through the continuous encounter with spaces that promise inclusion while withholding it.[48]

[48] Adrian Searle, "Mona Hatoum Review – Electrified," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/03/mona-hatoum-review-tate-modern-electrified.

Despite these differences in medium and intensity, both practices foreground the body as a site where displacement is registered and negotiated. Hatoum's work externalizes this condition through spatial confrontation, while my paintings internalize it through stillness, restraint, and duration. In both cases, the viewer is invited to consider how environments shape not only where bodies can exist, but how they are made to feel within those spaces.

By placing my work in dialogue with Hatoum's, this comparison expands the understanding of melancholia beyond representation to include spatial experience. It highlights how different artistic strategies—installation and painting—can engage similar questions of belonging, visibility, and displacement while producing distinct affective encounters. If Hatoum's work makes hostility visible, my practice focuses on the quieter, less visible forms of exclusion that persist within everyday life.

2.4 Jin-me Yoon: National Identity, Performance, and Landscape

The work of Jin-me Yoon provides a crucial context for examining how national identity, landscape, and performance intersect within diasporic experience in Canada. Working primarily in photography, video, and installation, Yoon interrogates how racialized bodies are positioned within national narratives, often using her own image to expose the constructed nature of belonging. Her practice reveals how identity is not simply expressed but staged—performed in relation to dominant cultural expectations and visual codes.

Yoon's work frequently engages Canadian landscape as an ideological space

Figure 14. *Mi Ryun Rim (Honouring A Group of Sixty-Seven)*, 1996/2021, by Jin-me Yoon. Inkjet print, 66 × 165.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

rather than a neutral backdrop. In works such as A Group of Sixty-Seven, she inserts racialized bodies into visual frameworks historically associated with canonical Canadian landscape traditions, disrupting the inherited language of national identity.[49] These interventions expose how the Canadian landscape has been constructed through exclusionary frameworks that privilege whiteness and erase other presences.[50] By placing racialized bodies within these spaces, Yoon renders visible the tension between representation and belonging.[51]

---

[49] Ming Tiampo, "Examining Nation," in Jin-me Yoon: Life & Work (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2022); Art Canada Institute, "Jin-me Yoon, A Group of Sixty-Seven, 1996."

[50] Philip Monk, Jin-me Yoon: Unsettled Landscapes (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2001).

[51] Jin-me Yoon, "Honouring A Group of Sixty-Seven," artist website, accessed March 29, 2026, https://www.jin-meyoon.com/works/honouring-a-group-of-sixty-seven

This strategy aligns with broader critiques of multiculturalism, where inclusion is often performed symbolically without addressing underlying structures of exclusion.[52] Yoon's work makes this dynamic explicit: the body appears within the national frame, yet its presence unsettles rather than confirms belonging. Identity becomes something enacted under observation, shaped by the expectations of the viewer and the nation.

Performance, in Yoon's practice, is not theatrical but durational and subtle. The repetition of the body across different landscapes, poses, and contexts reveals how belonging must be continually negotiated rather than assumed. As Ahmed suggests, national identity is produced through repeated orientations—ways of aligning the body with space, history, and collective narratives.[53] Yoon's work exposes the instability of these alignments, showing how they can never fully accommodate racial difference.

My painting practice resonates strongly with Yoon's interrogation of national space, particularly in its focus on Canadian sites as locations where belonging is staged. However, while Yoon often inserts her own body directly into these landscapes, my work positions figures within everyday environments. These spaces, like Yoon's landscapes, are not neutral; they are constructed images of the nation that carry ideological weight.

The difference lies in the mode of engagement. Yoon's work operates through performance and photographic intervention, making the act of insertion visible and deliberate. In contrast, my paintings depict scenes in which the performance of belonging appears normalized. Figures wear appropriate clothing, occupy expected spaces, and

[52] Bannerji, The Dark Side of the Nation; Ahmed, On Being Included.

[53] Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness.

participate in recognizable rituals. Yet despite this apparent alignment, their affective distance remains palpable. The performance is complete, but the feeling is absent.

This distinction further extends the understanding of melancholia within diasporic practice. In Yoon's work, the tension lies in the visibility of the intervention: the body disrupts the image. In my work, the tension lies in the absence of disruption: the image appears coherent, yet something does not hold. Melancholia emerges not through visible conflict, but through subtle dissonance between appearance and experience.

By situating my practice in dialogue with Yoon's, this comparison underscores how national identity is continuously constructed through images, performances, and spatial arrangements. It reveals how belonging is not granted through visibility alone, but remains contingent upon structures that exceed representation. If Yoon's work exposes the instability of national images, my paintings focus on the affective consequences of inhabiting them.

2.5 Positioning My Practice in Relation

The preceding analyses situate my work within a constellation of contemporary practices that engage melancholia, diaspora, and the politics of belonging through distinct formal and spatial strategies. While the works of Salman Toor, Mona Hatoum, and Jin-me Yoon differ in medium, context, and emphasis, each offers a framework for understanding how racialized subjects navigate the affective and structural limits of belonging. Positioning my practice in relation to these artists clarifies both shared concerns and critical divergences.

Across these practices, melancholia emerges not as a singular emotion but as a condition shaped by displacement, visibility, and unresolved attachment to national ideals. As discussed in Chapter One, racial melancholia persists when belonging is promised yet remains structurally unattainable, producing a sustained affective tension.[54] Each of the artists examined engages this condition through different spatial and formal registers. Toor locates melancholia within intimate interiors, where the brown body negotiates desire, vulnerability, and historical consciousness. Hatoum externalizes displacement through spatial confrontation, transforming environments into sites of instability and threat. Yoon interrogates national identity through performative insertion into landscape, exposing how belonging is constructed through visual and ideological frameworks.

My practice enters this conversation through a distinct focus on everyday public and semi-public spaces associated with national promise—tourist landmarks, consumer environments, transit zones, and sites of collective celebration. Unlike Toor's interiors, which offer moments of relational intimacy, my paintings emphasize exposure and visibility. Unlike Hatoum's installations, which produce immediate spatial tension, my work engages quieter, more familiar environments where exclusion operates subtly. Unlike Yoon's performative interventions, which visibly disrupt national imagery, my paintings depict scenes in which the performance of belonging appears seamless, yet remains affectively unstable.

---

[54] Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation.

This positioning highlights a key contribution of my work: the articulation of melancholia through ordinary, normalized spaces. Rather than foregrounding rupture or intervention, my paintings focus on the cumulative effects of repetition—returning to the same types of locations, gestures, and visual codes that structure immigrant life. In this context, melancholia is not activated by singular events but sustained through everyday encounters with spaces that promise inclusion without delivering it.

The figure within my paintings plays a central role in this articulation. Like Toor, I foreground the brown body, positioning it as visible and central rather than peripheral. However, while Toor's figures often engage in relational or intimate scenarios, my figures are frequently isolated within expansive or impersonal settings. This isolation emphasizes what might be understood as unaccompanied belonging—a condition in which presence is achieved without relational or emotional anchoring.

At the same time, my work extends Yoon's interrogation of national space by shifting focus from iconic landscapes to everyday sites of participation and consumption. Locations such as shopping centres and public celebrations operate as microcosms of national identity, where belonging is enacted through routine behaviors rather than explicit performances. These spaces reveal how inclusion is mediated through class, access, and visibility, reinforcing the arguments outlined in Chapter One regarding the material conditions of belonging.[55]

[55] Bannerji, The Dark Side of the Nation; Ahmed, On Being Included.

In relation to Hatoum, my practice diverges in its treatment of spatial tension. Where Hatoum produces environments that visibly unsettle and confront the viewer, my paintings maintain an outward sense of familiarity. The discomfort they generate is not immediate but accumulative, emerging through stillness, repetition, and affective distance. This shift from confrontation to subtle dissonance reflects a broader interest in how melancholia operates within the ordinary rather than the exceptional.

Taken together, these distinctions position my work as contributing to contemporary discourses on diaspora and melancholia through a focus on affective subtlety, spatial familiarity, and the repetition of everyday life. Painting becomes the medium through which these conditions are held and examined, allowing for a sustained engagement with experiences that resist resolution or clear articulation.

By situating my practice alongside these artists, this chapter has demonstrated that melancholia is not a fixed concept but a flexible framework that manifests differently across contexts, bodies, and media. The comparisons drawn here do not seek to align my work directly with these practices, but to clarify its specificity within a broader field of inquiry. In doing so, this chapter reinforces the central question of this research: how belonging is not secured through arrival, but continually negotiated through space, affect, and embodiment.

2.6 Exhibition as Spatial Practice

The exhibition marked a significant shift in how I experienced my own work. For the first time, I encountered the paintings outside the constraints of the studio, where

space had been limited and conditions—particularly lighting—restricted how the work could be seen. In the studio, the paintings often felt contained and muted, with little room to move around them or experience them at a distance.

In the gallery space, this changed. The work opened up. The paintings appeared to breathe and exist in relation to one another, forming a collective environment rather than a series of individual images. Their scale, spacing, and lighting allowed for movement, pause, and encounter. What had previously been experienced in isolation began to function as a shared visual and affective field.

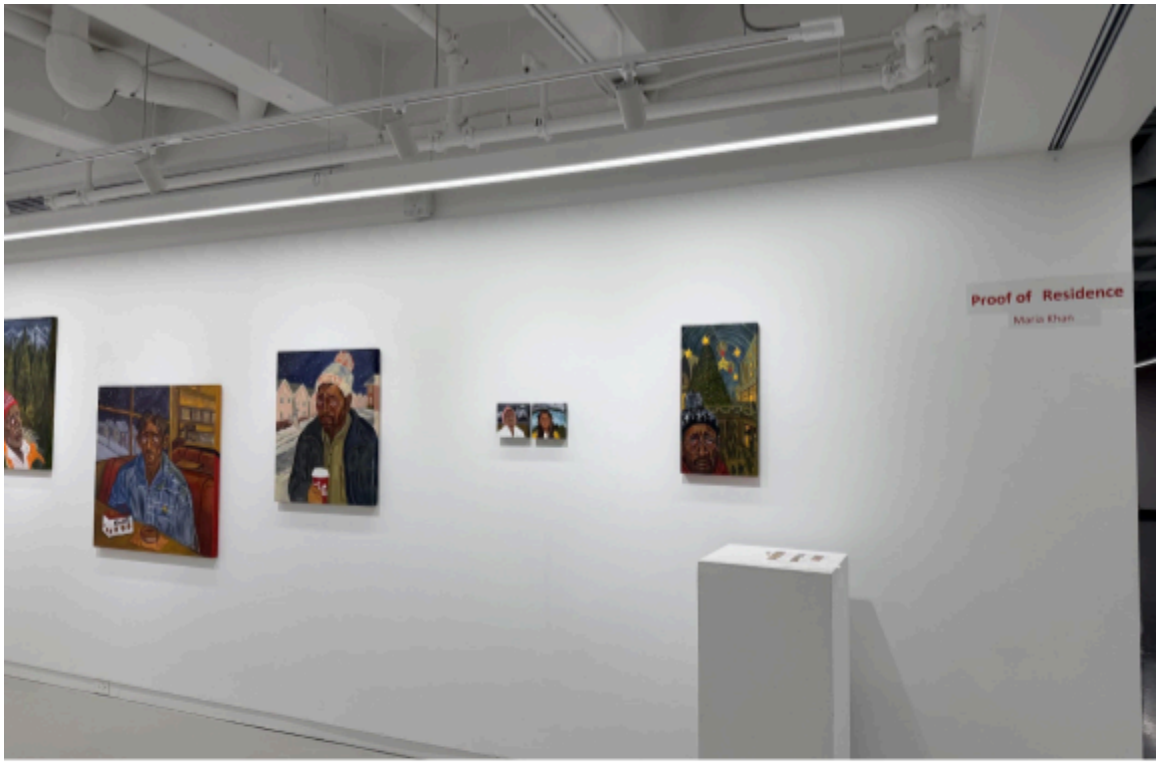

Figure 15. *Proof of Residence* (installation view), 2026, OCAD University Ignite Gallery. Photograph by the author.

Positioning myself within the exhibition as a viewer, I became aware of the work in a different way. While I had been conscious of the themes I was engaging—belonging, displacement, and melancholia—the exhibition revealed connections between the works that were not fully visible during the process of making. The paintings began to speak to each other, reinforcing a sense of repetition and continuity that extended beyond individual compositions.

The responses from viewers further shifted my understanding of the work. Many approached me to share how they saw themselves—or their parents—reflected in the figures. They spoke about their own experiences of migration, struggle, and adaptation, often connecting the imagery to personal memories, such as visiting Tim Hortons as part of their early encounters with Canadian life. These responses were frequently marked by recognition and emotional resonance, with some viewers describing a sense of shared exhaustion or quiet persistence.

What I had initially understood as a personal narrative began to expand into something collective. The experience of migration, as it emerged through the exhibition, was not singular but shared—repeating across different lives in similar forms. The figures in the paintings no longer belonged only to my story; they became sites through which others could locate their own.Sitting within the gallery, observing both the work and its reception, I became aware that the paintings continued to generate meaning beyond their making. They revealed new connections, new narratives, and new forms of identification. In this way, the exhibition did not conclude the work but extended it, transforming painting into an ongoing space of encounter, reflection, and shared experience.

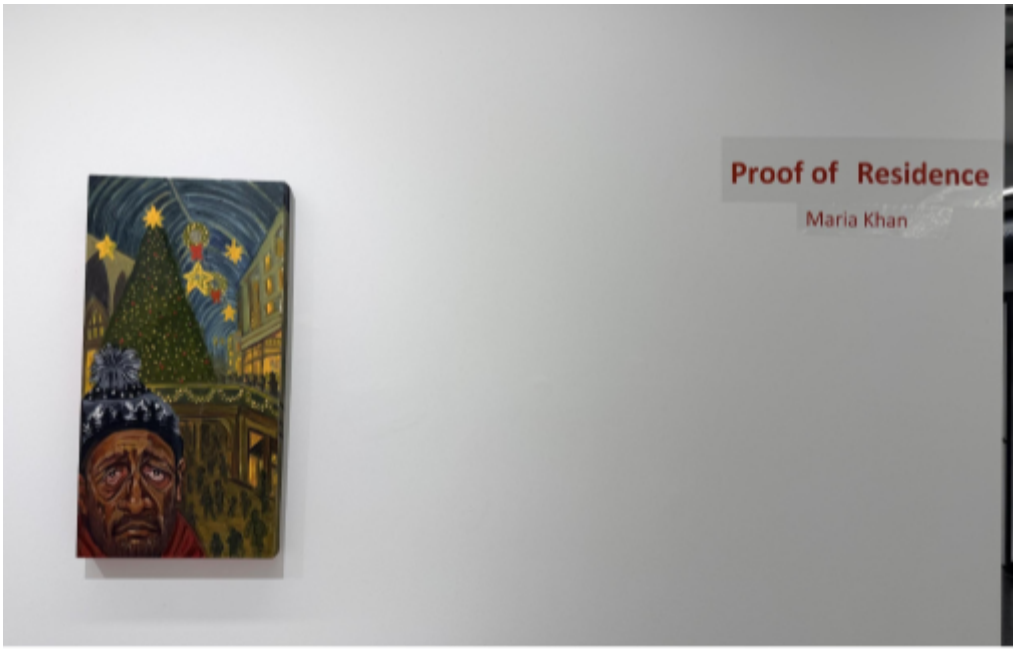

Figure 16. *Proof of Residence* (installation view), 2026, OCAD University Ignite Gallery. Photograph by the author.

In this sense, the exhibition did not resolve the questions posed throughout this research, but made them more immediate and embodied. What had been explored through painting and writing—as a condition of presence without belonging—became something encountered in real time, shared between the work and its viewers. The persistence of these responses suggests that the experience of not fully arriving is not singular, but widely felt. It is this unresolved condition—of being present yet not fully at home—that this research ultimately returns to.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how belonging is not secured through presence alone, but shaped through ongoing negotiation—across space, the body, and everyday experience. Through painting, these conditions are not explained, but held: visible in moments that feel familiar, yet remain unsettled.

The exhibition made this condition more immediate. Viewers recognized themselves and their own histories within the work, suggesting that this experience is not singular, but shared. What appears as distance or dissonance is not an individual failure, but part of a broader structure that shapes how belonging is encountered.

Rather than resolving this condition, the works remain within it—repeating gestures, spaces, and encounters that never fully settle. In this way, belonging is not presented as something achieved, but as something continuously approached.

This project also points toward broader questions that extend beyond the scope of this thesis. By focusing on everyday public spaces and subtle forms of dissonance, the work opens a space for thinking about how belonging is structured within contemporary national contexts. It raises questions about how systems of inclusion operate—not only through visibility and participation, but through more diffuse and affective conditions of recognition and distance.

In this sense, the project aligns with wider conversations in diasporic and postcolonial discourse, where belonging is understood as uneven, negotiated, and shaped by historical and cultural forces. While this research does not explicitly position itself as a decolonial project, it gestures toward such frameworks by questioning the assumed neutrality of national spaces and by foregrounding experiences that remain partially unacknowledged within them.

As a practice-based inquiry, this work also establishes painting as a method for engaging these conditions. Future developments of this research may extend this approach through larger-scale works, or expanded environments that further explore how viewers physically encounter and move through these tensions.

Ultimately, this thesis does not seek to resolve belonging, but to reframe it—as a condition that is lived, repeated, and continuously negotiated. In doing so, it opens a space for future work to further examine how such experiences are shaped, shared, and transformed across different contexts.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. The Promise of Happiness. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Ahmed, Sara. On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Archer, Michael. Mona Hatoum. London: Phaidon, 1997.

Augé, Marc. Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. Translated by John Howe. London: Verso, 1995.

Bannerji, Himani. The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000.

Bennett, Jill. Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London: Routledge, 1994.

Cvetkovich, Ann. An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Eng, David L., and Shinhee Han. Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” In The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14, edited and translated by James Strachey, 243-58. London: Hogarth Press, 1957.

Monk, Philip. Jin-me Yoon: Unsettled Landscapes. Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2001.

Muñoz, José Esteban. Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Noor, Tausif. “Salman Toor’s Cosmopolitan Queer Life.” Frieze, February 16, 2021.

OCAD University. “Interdisciplinary Master’s in Art, Media and Design.” Accessed March 22, 2026.

Sharma, Nandita. Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of ‘Migrant Workers’ in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.

Sullivan, Graeme. Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010.

Tiampo, Ming. “Examining Nation.” In Jin-me Yoon: Life & Work. Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2022.

Waheed, Nayyirah. salt. [Lexington, KY]: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.

Whitney Museum of American Art. “Salman Toor: How Will I Know.” Exhibition page. New York, 2020.

Searle, Adrian. “Mona Hatoum Review – Electrified.” *The Guardian*. May 3, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/03/mona-hatoum-review-tate-modern-electrified.

“Queer Boy and Brown Immigrant: I Know a Place by Salman Toor.” *On Art and Aesthetics*. January 10, 2020. https://onartandaesthetics.com/2020/01/10/queer-boy-and-brown-immigrant-i-know-a-place-by-salman-toor/.

Jin-me Yoon, “Honouring A Group of Sixty-Seven,” artist website, accessed March 29, 2026, https://www.jin-meyoon.com/works/honouring-a-group-of-sixty-seven